

IRANIAN INTERESTS IN IRAQ IN THE POST-SADDAM ERA

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Abstract- Iran's geographical location together with its vast amount of natural resources are the main factors that drives Iran's expansionary desire and hegemony in the Arab Gulf region. Iraq has become an essential part in the strategies of Iranian decision-makers after 2003 that has to be maintained. Iran's top priority was that Iraq must become a part of Iran's sphere of influence in competition with the U.S. presence in the Gulf in the post-Saddam Era. Iran takes advantage of its relations with the Iraqi government formed after 2003 to achieve its political and economic goals. This paper discusses and analyzes the role of political and economic interests of Iran in Iraq in the post-Saddam Era.

Keywords- Iranian interests, Political Influence, Economic Influence, Post-Saddam era

I. INTRODUCTION

The Iranian-Iraqi relations have been characterized by struggles and persistent tensions despite the religious and social bonds they share. The border between Iran and Iraq is 1280 Km long. There were incessant border disputes in spite of the fact that many agreements on the shared border were concluded between two countries, e.g., the Algeria Agreement¹ in 1975 which decided the river border in Shat Al-Arab as per the "Taluk" line, the mid-line of the navigable water (Al-Budairi, 2008: 378).

The Iran-Iraq war broke out in 1980 due to two main reasons. The first was an ideological reason which stemmed from the Islamic ideological threats posed by the Iranian Revolution. The second reason was that Saddam's new regime had ambitions of compelling the new regime in Iran to recognize that the balance of power in the Gulf region was in favor of the Iraqi military forces, in addition to Iraq's desire to control the entire region of the Shat Al-Arab (Tripp, 2006:305).

According to the gain considerations in international relations, Iran was the first beneficiary of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 for supporting and maintaining its interests in the region. Iran sought to settle its scores with the two parties of the dispute who sought recourse to gain Iran's trust and friendship from the outset at the relations level. Iran benefited from Iraq which relinquished all its demands with regards to its border with Iran and sovereignty over territorial waters. Concurrently, Iran enhanced its relations with Kuwait and the Gulf

States and condemned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and agreed with the international community on the need for the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait (Al-Ghoneim, 2002: 25).

Despite the Iranian condemnation of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, it simultaneously opposed the U.S. presence in the region and also called for a holy "jihad" against their presence. The unprecedented presence of huge numbers of foreign troops equipped with advanced weapons can be attributed to the economic and military capability and geo-strategic location of Iraq, which indirectly indicated that Iraq was the most powerful regional power in the region. Therefore, Iran's ambition to become the solitary regional power would be turned down too. Hence, Iran's rejection of the foreign presence was inevitable (Al-Jorani, 2012:81).

In 2003, the U.S. threats of using military force against Iraq gave Iran the pretext to build good relations with the Gulf States especially Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. This facilitated and expedited rapprochement for more economic, political and security cooperation. Although Iran supported and facilitated the U.S. to occupy Iraq and overthrow Saddam's regime, it viewed the military build-up and occupation of Iraq as an attempt to reshape the geopolitical map in the Gulf region and weaken the regional powers (Mubaidin, 2007:15).

II. IRAN'S ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

During the rule of the former Iranian president, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Shah (1941-1979), Iran played an important role in Middle East because of its alliance with the U.S. and Israel and it also had ambitions to dominate the economic resources in that region. Iran's foreign policy in the 1960's was to expand its economic and political influence towards the Arab Gulf in the south, the Arab states in the west, Afghanistan and Pakistan and India in the east. Iran justified its action by saying that it was to protect

¹ The Algeria Agreement is an agreement signed between Iraq and Iran on March 6, 1975 between the then-Vice President Saddam Hussein and the Shah of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, under the supervision of the former Algerian President "Houari Boumediene". It was to settle the maritime border disputes between the two countries in the Shatt al-Arab area. Iraq has canceled this agreement after the fall of Shah's regime in 1979, which led to the outbreak of the first Gulf War in 1980 between the two countries (Waisy, 2015:61).

its oil pipelines from the Gulf to Asia and Europe (Al-Hassani 2011).

In 1965, Iran adopted a political project that included the annexation of most of the Arab Gulf States by Iran. The Iranian government had specified a special budget for the aforesaid purpose. Moreover, there were some factors that helped Iran to implement its political project and they are as follows:

1. The weakness of the Arab States as a result of their defeat in the 1967 war with Israel.
2. The gradual British withdrawal from the Gulf region from 1962 until 1971.
3. The U.S. supported Iran's expansionist ambitions in Middle East (Helayel, 2011: 24-25).
4. Iran benefited from its geographical location vis-à-vis the Arab Gulf States; Iran has the longest coastline in comparison with all the Arab Gulf States i.e., 1200 km out of 3365 km. Therefore, the maritime location is considered to be a major factor for Iran's economic and military force, as shown in Table 5.1 (Al-Swedi 1983:10).

Iran also used an interventionist policy in the internal affairs of foreign states in several areas, for example, Iran supplied the Kurdish forces in northern Iraq with arms to fight against the Iraqi government in Baghdad during the nineteen sixties and seventies. Iran's military intervention in northern Yemen during the civil war in Yemen between 1962 and 1970, Iran's participation in the military action against some armed groups in the province of "Baluchistan", Pakistan in 1973 and Iran's support of the Omani government in its war against the Liberation Front in the "Dhofar" region in the southern part of Oman in 1973 (Al-Hassani 2011).

After the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, there has been a major shift in Iran's regional and international relations in the Middle East, especially after the change of U.S. policy towards Iran whereby it became an enemy even though it had been very strong ally of the U.S. in the past. The role of Iran during that period was to promote Islamic revolution to monarchies in the Gulf States and replace them with governments that had complete loyalty to Iran and the establishment of a sole superior power that is able to resist the ambitions of other states in the Gulf region (Syed 2013).

On the other hand, Iran's expansionist ambitions was at the expense of Israel as Iran supported the Islamic resistance movements in Middle East against Israel, for example, the Lebanese Hezbollah as a representative of the "Shiites" and the Hamas as the representative of the "Sunnis" in Palestine (Amnh 2010:99).

An important event which had a significant impact on Iran's ambitions in Middle East was Saddam

Hussein's success in seizing power in Iraq in 1979 (Al-Badry 2014:95). The conflict between Iran's desire to expand its interests in the Gulf region and the personal ambitions of the Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, to dominate over the Gulf region was the main reason that led to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. That period represented the beginning of Iranian interference in Iraq and the rest of the Gulf States (Baker Institute Study 1998:2).

Due to its fear of the impact of the principles of Islamic revolution in Iran on its political system, Kuwait supported Iraq financially in its war against Iran. As a result, Iran increased its terrorist activities in Kuwait in 1983 and attempted to assassinate the Emir of Kuwait in 1985. Iran also carried out several military operations against Kuwaiti oil sites in the Gulf from 1987 to 1988 and these military operations prompted the U.S. to protect Kuwait from any potential Iranian attacks (Salem 2009).

With the outbreak of the Gulf crisis due to Iraqi's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Iran was fully aware that any change in the political map among the Gulf States or inside any of the countries should not be allowed if it could lead to the undermining of Iran's strategic interests in the Gulf region. Additionally, the expansion of Iraq and its seizure of Kuwait's oil fields could also lead to the supremacy of Iraq's political and economic status in the region and that would be in conflict with Iran's interests (Rajab 1997: 345).

Throughout the crisis, Iran sought to achieve several strategic goals based on its perceptions of the security in the Gulf region. Firstly, it sought to strengthen its military capabilities and become a dominant power in the region without intervening as a party in the war. In order to identify the impact of the war on its national security, Iran had remained neutral from the beginning of the war. Secondly, Iran sought to prevent Iraq from becoming a strong state again so that it can not compete with Iran and also limit its ability to extend its influence and achieve its goals in the Arab region. In other words, Iran sought to remove Iraq as a competitor in the Gulf region because of its military capabilities and this would allow Iran to impose its point of view on the countries of the region regarding the security of the Gulf region (Fouda 2000: 44). Therefore, this crisis represented a golden opportunity for Iran to rearrange the balance of power in the region and at the same time maintain its interests that is in line with the ambitions of its political system (Al-Jorani 2012:85).

After the Second Gulf War, Iran dedicated part of its budget for the development of its nuclear program²

² Iran's nuclear program has been the subject of global hand-wringing for more than two decades. While Iran has insisted it is not building nuclear weapons, its enrichment of uranium and history of deception have created doubts. After years of acrimony

which posed a direct threat to the regional neighboring countries of Iran (Mohammad 2007: 56-57). Thus, Iran's military spending increased from \$ 4.7 billion in 1997 to \$ 7.5 billion in 2000 (Syed 2013).

Besides that, Iran sought to establish free economic zones on the Iranian islands in order to develop economic relations with Kuwait. Trade exchange between the two countries increased from about \$ 78.2 million in 1997, to about \$ 345 million in 2000 and to \$ 621 million in 2003 (Kashk 2014:3).

As a result of the improvement of relations between Kuwait and Iran, the Kuwaiti foreign minister, Sheikh Muhammed Salem Al-Sabah, visited Iran on January 12, 2002, and signed security and economic agreements with Iran and they also explored their unified position towards Iraq. Moreover, Sheikh Muhammed also requested Iran's assistance to close the case files against Kuwaiti prisoners of war in Iraq. Iran responded positively with readiness to close the said files through diplomatic ties with the Iraqi government and also promised to release all Kuwaiti prisoners and others from Iraq (Kashk 2014: 1-5).

In 2003, the U.S. threats of using military force against Iraq gave Iran the pretext to build good relations with the Gulf States especially Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. This facilitated and expedited rapprochement for more economic, political and security cooperation. Although Iran supported the U.S. occupation of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam regime, but it viewed the U.S. military presence in Iraq as an attempt to weaken the regional powers in the Arab Gulf region (Mubaidin 2007:15).

In summary, it can be concluded that since the sixties and seventies of the last century, Iran had been looking forward to achieving its expansionist ambitions in the Middle East in general and the Arab Gulf region in particular through its strong military build-up, and interference in the internal affairs of other states based on the respective states' advantage of geographical location and economic resources. On the other hand, Iran tried to export the principles of its Islamic revolution to neighboring Arab countries and replace the current governments with ones that have complete loyalty to Iran, and this later led to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. After the Second Gulf War, Iran tried to play a positive role with Kuwait by exploiting its dispute with Iraq. This was because Iran was afraid of the growth of Iraq's

strategic role in the Gulf region and it also wanted to achieve greater political and economic gains at the expense of the U.S. interests in the region.

III. IRANIAN INTERESTS IN IRAQ IN THE POST-SADDAM ERA

Iran's interests in Iraq led to Iran taking actions to infiltrate and destabilize the Iraqi regime, thus paving the way for Iran to achieve its foreign policy objectives in Middle East in general and the Gulf region in particular. These interests can be tackled as follows:

3.1 Political Influence of Iran in Iraq

Iraq was the top priority in Iran's strategy to achieve its interests with regards to its foreign policy because of the following reasons:

First, from Iran's perspective, Iraq is a regional power that cannot be ignored when looking at the balance of power in the region due to several reasons. Iraq has a human capital that exceeds 30 million people and it is second after Saudi Arabia in terms of oil reserves as it has 124 billion barrels which is enough to produce three million barrels per day for more than 100 years. Thus, the Iranian decision makers recognized the importance of Iraq in the regional balance, now and in the future (Gregory 1998:81).

Iraq received a great deal of attention in Iran's foreign policy because of its geographical adjacency, economic wealth and human capital. These elements helped Iraq to become one of the most active power in the region and a key player in deciding the existing regional balances in the Gulf region (Abed, interview, 2015).

Secondly, Iraq is the gate- way for Iran to the rest of the Gulf States and the Arab World to spread the ideology of its Islamic revolution. Therefore, Iran would be detached from the Shiite's presence in Syria and south of Lebanon if Iraq is not under its control (Gregory 1998:82).

Thirdly, Iran considers that Iraq is a historical, geographical and religious extension of Iran. Consequently, Iran deems that Iraq should be one of its provinces instead of an independent state. In this regard, the first Iranian president after the Iranian revolution in 1979, "Abu Al-Hasan Bani-Sadr", stated that, "Iraq was throughout history a part of "Faris" (Persia) and the Gulf region was always Iranian property. Hence, the Gulf's oil lies within Persian territories"(Farid 2007:57-60).

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein regime in 2003 provided the Islamic Republic of Iran with a historic opportunity to transform its relations with Iraq, which was formerly one of its most implacable enemies. It used the long porous border with Iraq, the longstanding ties with key Iraqi politicians, the political and religious parties and armed groups, and

and threats to bomb Iran's facilities, Iran and the world powers have agreed to settle the dispute on July 14, 2014. The deal sets limits on the Islamic Republic's nuclear program in exchange for relief from economic sanctions that have crimped oil exports and crippled its economy (Tirone, 2015).

its economic and religious power and military intelligence to expand its influence and thus establish itself as the key external broker in Iraq (Eisenstadt et al. 2011: xi).

The Iranian role in Iraq was closely linked to Iran's ambitions to exercise a wider regional role in the Gulf region that is proportional to its political, economic and military capabilities as well as its geopolitical importance. Iran used a number of tools and policies in exercising this role after the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Most notably was Iran's desire to extend the friendship and cooperation with Iraqi political actors, and to have good relations. Such relations would depend on dialogue to achieve peace and mutual respect for the sovereignty of each country and to leave the past wars triggered by Saddam behind. The support provided by Iran to many Iraqi Shiite parties and militias prevented the U.S. from improving stability in Iraq and therefore made Iran a potential threat to the U.S. (Al-Ansari, interview, 2015).

Iran's interests in Iraq have been reflected by its long-standing regional ambitions and desire to resolve its ongoing dispute with the U.S. over the development of its nuclear program and the Arab-Israeli conflict. After the removal of threats posed by conventional military weapons and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran's aim was to prevent Iraq from re-emerging as a threat with or without the presence of the U.S. forces. The prevalence of Shiites in Iraq was viewed by Iran as a potential strategic asset that could advance its interests. Therefore, the Iranian intentions in Iraq partially tallied with those of the U.S., whose aim was to establish a democratic government in Iraq that can support the interests of the majority, the Shiites, and therefore empower potential Shiite allies (Al-Badry 2014:220).

However, Iran's objection to divide Iraq into several states is one of the most fundamental interests of Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq after 2003. For Iran, it is easier to deal with Iraq as one central entity than dealing with multiple ones. Iran still has other vital interests, for example, keeping Iraq militarily weak and unable to threaten it or any other country in the region. Moreover, Iran seeks to strengthen its dominance in the Shatt Al-Arab area, which has been experiencing maritime disputes between the two countries (Tu'mah, interview, 2015).

As a result of the growing Iranian role in Iraq after the fall of Saddam, Iran has become more influential in shaping and steering Iraqi policy towards achieving its interests in the region. The most important tool employed by Iran to achieve these interests was its encouragement to divide Iraq into three regions: a Kurdish region in the north, a "Sunni" region in the center and a "Shiite" region in

the south. Eventually, this division would weaken Iraq and remove it from the competition circle as a regional power (Al-Sussi, interview, 2015).

A report was issued by "Baker-Hamilton", a committee formed by the American Congress in 2006 to investigate the most convenient strategy that should be followed in Iraq. The report highlighted the Iranian intervention and its support of the militias. It also recommended that diplomatic talks should be conducted with Iran and Syria to achieve stability in Iraq which could then enable the U.S. forces to move from a combative position, which was operative as of 2003, to a supportive position of the Iraqi forces to maintain stability (Atwan 2007:32).

On the other hand, it is important for the Iranians to deal with Iraq as an ally in order to confront other competitors in the region such as Saudi Arabia. Hence, Iran has been persistently trying to exert its influence on the political process in Iraq in order to achieve its interest through the Iraqi political parties that were loyal to the Iranian government. The Iranian leadership was also seeking to ensure that Iraqi territories would not be used by the U.S. or any Western country as a base for military attacks on Iran because of its efforts to develop its nuclear program (Al-Bloushi, interview, 2015).

During the U.S. occupation of Iraq (2003-2011), Iran's major interest was to prevent Iraq from becoming a strong state once again, which would then compete with it and limit its capability to extend its influence and achieve its goals in the Gulf region (Al-Ghalib 2014:1). Iran has strived to ensure its security and territorial integrity through the building up of a huge military force that is able to defend its territorial integrity and deter any hostile party, whether international or regional, from carrying out military strikes against it (Hussein 2011:13).

Iran has also proceeded to infiltrate the Iraqi leadership system by providing the ruling junta of Iraq with consultation services on some political and economic issues experienced by Iraq which was in addition to intensifying dialogues and communications with them. Moreover, Iran gave the green light to its intelligence services for secret and overt political work in Iraq via Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Iranian intelligence (Wahid, & Hossam 2013: 4). Similarly, the Royal Institute of International Affairs in Britain in a study in August, 2006, reached the following conclusion "the Iranian influence in Iraq is stronger than that of the U.S." (Ahmed 2008:82).

Based on the foregoing, it can be concluded that Iran has taken advantage of the political vacuum resulting from the fall of Saddam regime as a result of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Therefore, Iran has been able to

achieve its interests in Iraq and the Gulf region. Iran's top priority was that Iraq must become a part of Iran's sphere of influence in competition with the U.S. and the GCC. Furthermore, Iran had a significant role in creating a weak and puppet political system in Iraq and was determined to intervene in Iraq's affairs to shape and direct the political process in its favor.

3.2 Economic Influence of Iran in Iraq

Iraq does not only represent political importance for Iran but it is also an economic one. According to Iran's decision makers, the importance of Iraq lies in its location which is situated in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula and it is at the midpoint of the three continents namely Europe, Asia and Africa (Barzegar 2008:53). Moreover, the area enjoys maritime significance that enables it to play a key role in determining the economic and political interests of certain states. Due to its overlooking site on the Arab Gulf, Iraq has strategic importance as it enjoys geo-strategic advantages with the existence of the largest oil reserves in particular. According to some estimates, Iraq's reserves of crude oil reaches up to 124 billion barrels which is equivalent to 11% of the world's total reserves, in addition to other huge natural resources e.g., gas (Kumins 2004:2). It also ranks as the second richest country in the Arab World as its water resources amounts to 44.1 billion cubic meters per year, thus providing it with a huge agricultural potential. Moreover, Iran has considered Iraq to be a golden opportunity for Iran to rebuild its economy because it has repeatedly experienced fluctuations due to the economic sanctions that the U.S. imposed on Iran over its nuclear program (Al-Ghalib 2014:4-5).

There have been many common interests between Iraq and Iran throughout history, particularly the economic ones. Due to the demise of Saddam regime, the relations between the two countries improved significantly. Iran contributed positively by providing Iraq with goods and energizing religious tourism and it also helped with the reconstruction process (Kawak, interview, 2015).

However, Iran has no real interests in the reconstruction or encouragement of investments in Iraq, but its major interest was to make Iraq into a bigger market for Iranian products which can help to alleviate the effects of the economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the Western countries upon Iran because of its nuclear ambitions. Iran's attempts to develop its economic relations with Iraq was to achieve its main objectives by using Iraq's position OPEC with regards to oil quotas and the control of its prices in order to weaken the Saudi's position in OPEC (Imran, interview, 2015).

Iran takes advantage of its relations with the Iraqi government formed after 2003 to achieve its economic goals as Iraq has become the most

important market for Iran's non-oil products. The two countries signed 110 economic memoranda of understanding and they also agreed to increase the electrical power exported to Iraq from 400 megawatts to 1000 megawatts (Azbawi 2004:85). Moreover, there has also been a boom in religious tourism with one million Iraqis visiting the Shiite shrines in the Iranian cities of "Qum" and "Mashhad" and a similar number of Iranians visiting the Shiite shrines in the Iraqi cities of "Najaf", "Kazimiyah" and "Karbala" (Ahmed & Massad 2009:64-65). Other economic links include contracts concluded between some Iraqi mayors and Iranian companies and businessmen using some Iranian ports and shipping facilities for goods coming into Iraq. Iran also established economic relations in the fields of construction and communication with Iraqi Kurdistan (Al-Swedi 1983:10).

The Iranian's economic interests in Iraq was also increased due to Iraq's dire need for both Iranian products to meet Iraq's basic needs and experience to help in the reconstruction of Iraq. Many Iranian companies have effectively contributed to investment in the construction, power and communication sectors in Iraq. In addition, the religious tourism also increased between two countries. More than two million Iranians visit the Shiite shrines in Iraq every year because of the close relationship in terms of faith and sect (Hassan, interview, 2015). Iran followed different procedures and exercised certain policies to sustain its economic interests in Iraq including (Wahid & Hossam 2013:4):

1. Iran took advantage of the Iraqi markets and opened them for all kinds of products and making Iraq economically dependent on Iran in almost everything as demonstrated in Figure 5.2 below:
2. Iran purchased some Iraqi assets (industrial, agricultural and real estate) and turned them into safe havens for its supporters to live in and to seek work, thus widening Iran's sphere of influence;
3. It encouraged Iranian merchants to travel to Iraq and invest there, especially in the Shiite cities;
4. Iran has plans to promote its Port "Al-Khumaini" as a substitute for Jordan's Port "Aqaba" and to link Iran and Iraq with a railway that extends to Syria and up to Turkey; and
5. Iran has pursued strong ties with the wealthy people of Iraq both in the private and public sectors through the high class businessmen and high ranking officers in Iraq's administrative body.

Moreover, another economic infiltration that was exercised by Iran was its aim to reinforce its interests in the stealing of oil from the oil fields in Basra which is next to its border. Iran has resorted to slant drilling to extract oil from Iraqi oil wells under the pretext of "shared wells" between the two countries. The total volume of stolen oil was estimated at 500 thousand barrels per day (Wahid & Hossam 2013:4).

CONCLUSION

Iran considered the security of the Gulf region as an integral part of its security and thus it followed some strategies and procedures to achieve this security such as:

1. It has sought to expand its nuclear program and develop its military capabilities in order to impose a balance of power situation in the Gulf region in particular and in the Middle East in general, especially with the intensified presence of the U.S. military in the region.

2. It adopted a political and economic openness with the Gulf States in order to support the political and regional balance of power by means of building extended regional relations that can provide it with flexibility in political maneuvering and detach it from the international and regional isolation exercised by the U.S. in different ways.

Based on the foregoing, Iraq has become an essential part in the strategies of Iranian decision-makers that has to be maintained. By virtue of its geographical location, its great amount of wealth and its religious ties with Iran, Iraq would always be of strategic importance to Iran. Hence, the Iranian decision makers would never cease regarding Iraq as one of the top priorities in their regional strategic planning that aims to achieve their supreme nationalist interests. Iran's pursuit of cooperation with Iraq in all fields via the various policies and tools would enable it to achieve political and economic gains at the expense of all other regional players in the region and would alleviate the effects of the economic siege imposed by the Western countries and the U.S. due to its insistence to develop a nuclear program.

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